

Japanese and American War Atrocities, Historical Memory and Reconciliation: World War II to Today

Mark Selden

War Crimes, Atrocities and State Terrorism

The controversies that continue to swirl around the Nanjing Massacre, the military comfort women, Unit 731 and other Japanese military atrocities rooted in colonialism and the Asia Pacific War are critical not only to understanding the dynamics of war, peace, and terror in the long twentieth century. They are also vital for understanding war memory and denial, with implications for peace and regional accommodation in the Asia Pacific region and the US-Japan relationship. [1]

This article offers a comparative framework for understanding war atrocities and the ways in which they are remembered, forgotten and memorialized. It examines a number of high profile atrocities in an effort to understand their character and the reasons why recognizing and accepting responsibility for their actions have been so difficult. Neither committing atrocities nor suppressing their memories is the exclusive property of a single nation. The issues examined here begin with atrocities committed during the Asia Pacific War and continue to the present.

What explains the fact that Japanese denial and refusal to provide compensation to victims has long been the subject of sharp domestic and international contention, while there has been relatively little analysis of United States atrocities, less criticism or recrimination for that nation's commission and denial of atrocities, and still less demand for reparations? What are the consequences of this difference for the two nations and the contemporary international relations of the Asia Pacific?

Among the war crimes and atrocities committed in World War II, the Nanjing Massacre . . . or Rape of Nanjing, or Nankin Daigakusatsu, or Nankin Jiken (Japanese) or Nanjing Datusha (Chinese) . . . remains the most controversial. These different names signal alternative Japanese, Chinese and international perceptions of the event: as "incident", as "massacre", as "rape", as "massive butchery".

The Nanjing Massacre is controversial not because the most basic facts are in doubt, although historians continue to contest the number of deaths and the interpretation of certain events. Rather it is controversial because of the shocking scale of the killing of Chinese civilians and prisoners of war in a single locale, because of the politics of denial, and because the relationship between the massacre and the character of the wider war remains little understood despite the outstanding research of Japanese and other scholars and journalists. [2]

Japanese neonationalists deny the very existence of a massacre and successive postwar Japanese governments have refused to accept responsibility for either the massacre or the wider war of aggression in which ten to thirty million Chinese died, explaining why these issues remain controversial. To understand why the Japanese government continues to fight this and other war memory battles in ways that poison its relations not only with its Asian neighbors but also with the United States and European nations requires reconsideration not only of contemporary Japanese nationalism, but also of the Cold War power structure that the US set in place during the occupation.

The US insulated Japan from war responsibility, first by maintaining Hirohito on the throne and shielding him from war crimes charges, second by protecting the Japanese state from war reparations claims from victims of colonialism, invasion, and atrocities, and finally by using its troops and bases both to guarantee Japan's defense and to isolate it from China, the Soviet Union, and other US rivals.

Before turning to this issue, one other question should be posed: more than six decades since Japan's defeat in the Pacific War, by what right does an American critically address issues of the Nanjing Massacre and Japan's wartime atrocities? Stated differently, in the course of those six decades US military forces have repeatedly violated international law and humanitarian ethics, notably in Korea, Indochina, Iraq and Afghanistan. In the course of those decades, Japan has never fought a war, although it has steadfastly backed the US in each of its wars. Yet Asian and global attention continues to focus on Japanese war atrocities and their denial, while paying little attention to those committed and denied by the United States.

Attempts to gauge war atrocities and to understand the ways in which they are remembered and suppressed, require the application of universal standards as articulated in the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials. In an age of nationalism, it is particularly important to apply such standards to the conduct of one's own nation. The German case, to which I return below, is particularly instructive. Germany, like Japan, was defeated by a US-led coalition, and the US played a key role in shaping institutions, war memories, and responses to war atrocities in both Germany and Japan. [3] Nevertheless, the outcomes in the two nations in the form of historical memory and reconciliation in the wake of war atrocities have differed sharply.

To unravel the most contentious memory wars in the Asia Pacific, I begin by offering a comparative framework for assessing Japanese and American war atrocities. I examine Japan's Nanjing Massacre and the American firebombing and atomic bombing of Japanese cities during World War II as each nation's signature atrocities. In each instance, I cast the issues in relation to the wider conduct of the war, and in the American case consider the legacy of the bombing for subsequent wars down to the present. At the center of the analysis is the assessment of these examples in light of principles of international law developed over many decades from the late nineteenth century, notably those enshrined in the Nuremberg and Tokyo Trials, and the Geneva Convention of 1949, that identify as acts of terrorism and crimes against humanity the slaughter of civilians and noncombatants by states and their militaries. [4] It is only by considering crimes by the victors as well as the vanquished in the Asia Pacific War and other wars that it is possible to lay to rest the ghosts of suppressed memories in order to build foundations for a peaceful cooperative order in the Asia Pacific.

But first, Nanjing.

The Nanjing Massacre and Structures of Violence in the Sino-Japanese War

Substantial portions of the Nanjing Massacre literature in English and Chinese—both the scholarship and the public debate—treat the event as emblematic of the wartime conduct of the Japanese, thereby essentializing the massacre as the embodiment of the Japanese character. In the discussion that follows, I seek to locate the unique and conjunctural features of the massacre in order to understand its relationship to the character of Japan's protracted China war and the wider Asia Pacific War.

Just as a small staged event by Japanese officers in 1931 provided the pretext for Japan's seizure of

China's Northeast and creation of the dependent state of Manchukuo, the minor clash between Japanese and Chinese troops at the Marco Polo Bridge on July 7, 1937 paved the way for full-scale invasion of China south of the Great Wall. By July 27, Japanese reinforcements from Korea and Manchuria as well as Naval Air Force units had joined the fight. The Army High Command dispatched three divisions from Japan and called up 209,000 men. With Japan's seizure of Beiping and Tianjin the next day, and an attack on Shanghai in August, the (undeclared) war began in earnest. In October, a Shanghai Expeditionary Army (SEA) under Gen. Matsui Iwane with six divisions was ordered to destroy enemy forces in and around Shanghai. The Tenth Army commanded by Gen. Yanagawa Heisuke with four divisions soon joined in. Anticipating rapid surrender by Chiang Kai-shek's National Government, the Japanese military encountered stiff resistance: 9,185 Japanese were killed and 31,125 wounded at Shanghai. But after landing at Hangzhou Bay, Japanese forces quickly gained control of Shanghai. By November 7, the two Japanese armies combined to form a Central China Area Army (CCAA) with an estimated 160,000-200,000 men. [5]

With Chinese forces in flight, Matsui's CCAA, with no orders from Tokyo, set out to capture the Chinese capital, Nanjing. Each unit competed for the honor of being the first to enter the capital. Historians such as Fujiwara Akira and Yoshida Yutaka sensibly date the start of the Nanjing Massacre to the atrocities committed against civilians en route to Nanjing. "Thus began," Fujiwara wrote, "the most enormous, expensive, and deadly war in modern Japanese history—one waged without just cause or cogent reason." And one that paved the way toward the Asia Pacific War that followed.

Japan's behavior at Nanjing departed dramatically from that in the capture of cities in earlier Japanese military engagements from the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 forward. One reason for the barbarity of Japanese troops at Nanjing and subsequently was that, counting on the "shock and awe" of the November attack on Shanghai to produce surrender, they were unprepared for the fierce resistance and heavy casualties that they encountered, prompting a desire for revenge. Indeed, throughout the war, like the Americans in Vietnam decades later, the Japanese displayed a profound inability to grasp the roots and strength of the nationalist resistance in the face of invading forces who enjoyed overwhelming weapons and logistical superiority. A second reason for the atrocities was that, as the two armies raced to capture Nanjing, the high command lost control, resulting in a volatile and violent situation.

The contempt felt by the Japanese military for Chinese military forces and the Chinese people set in motion a dynamic that led to the massacre. In the absence of a declaration of war, as Utsumi Aiko notes, the Japanese high command held that it was under no obligation to treat captured Chinese soldiers as POWs or observe other international principles of warfare that Japan had scrupulously adhered to in the 1904-05 Russo-Japanese War, such as the protection of the rights of civilians. Later, Japan would recognize captured US and Allied forces as POWs, although they too were treated badly. [6]

As Yoshida Yutaka notes, Japanese forces were subjected to extreme physical and mental abuse. Regularly sent on forced marches carrying 30-60 kilograms of equipment, they also faced ruthless military discipline. Perhaps most important for understanding the pattern of atrocities that emerged in 1937, in the absence of food provisions, as the troops raced toward Nanjing, they plundered villages and slaughtered their inhabitants in order to provision themselves. [7]



Gen. Matsui enters Nanjing

Chinese forces were belatedly ordered to retreat from Nanjing on the evening of December 12, but Japanese troops had already surrounded the city and many were captured. Other Chinese troops discarded weapons and uniforms and sought to blend in with the civilian population or surrender. Using diaries, battle reports, press accounts and interviews, Fujiwara Akira documents the slaughter of tens of thousands of POWs, including 14,777 by the Yamada Detachment of the 13th Division. Yang Daqing points out that Gen. Yamada had his troops execute the prisoners after twice being told by Shanghai Expeditionary Army headquarters to “kill them all”. [8]

Major Gen. Sasaki Toichi confided to his diary on December 13:

... our detachment alone must have taken care of over 20,000. Later, the enemy surrendered in the thousands. Frenzied troops--rebuffing efforts by superiors to restrain them--finished off these POWs one after another. . . . men would yell, ‘Kill the whole damn lot!’ after recalling the past ten days of bloody fighting in which so many buddies had shed so much blood.”

The killing at Nanjing was not limited to captured Chinese soldiers. Large numbers of civilians were raped and/or killed. Lt. Gen. Okamura Yasuji, who in 1938 became commander of the 10th Army, recalled “that tens of thousands of acts of violence, such as looting and rape, took place against civilians during the assault on Nanjing. Second, front-line troops indulged in the evil practice of executing POWs on the pretext of [lacking] rations.”

Chinese and foreigners in Nanjing comprehensively documented the crimes committed in the immediate aftermath of Japanese capture of the city. Nevertheless, as the above evidence indicates, the most important and telling evidence of the massacre is that provided by Japanese troops who participated in the capture of the city. What should have been a fatal blow to “Nanjing denial” occurred when the Kaikosha, a fraternal order of former military officers and neonationalist revisionists, issued a call to soldiers who had fought in Nanjing to describe their experience. Publishing the responses in a March 1985 “Summing Up”, editor Katogawa Kotaro cited reports by Unemoto Masami that he saw 3-6,000 victims, and by Itakura Masaaki of 13,000 deaths. Katogawa concluded: “No matter what the conditions of battle were, and no matter how that affected the hearts of men, such large-scale illegal killings cannot be justified. As someone affiliated with the former Japanese army, I can only apologize deeply to the Chinese people.”

A fatal blow . . . except that incontrovertible evidence provided by unimpeachable sources has never

stayed the hands of incorrigible deniers. I have highlighted the direct testimony of Japanese generals and enlisted men who documented the range and scale of atrocities committed during the Nanjing Massacre in order to show how difficult it is, even under such circumstances, to overcome denial.

Two other points emerge clearly from this discussion. The first is that the atrocities at Nanjing—just as with the comfort women—have been the subject of fierce public controversy. This controversy has erupted again and again over the textbook content and the statements of leaders ever since Japan's surrender, and particularly since the 1990s. The second is that, unlike their leaders, many Japanese citizens have consistently recognized and deeply regretted Japanese atrocities. Many have also supported reparations for victims.



Nanjing Memorial Museum with figure of 300,000 deaths

The massacre had consequences far beyond Nanjing. The Japanese high command, up to Emperor Hirohito, the commander-in-chief, while closely monitoring events at Nanjing, issued no reprimand and meted out no punishment to the officers and men who perpetrated these crimes. Instead, the leadership and the press celebrated the victory at the Chinese capital in ways that invite comparison with the elation of an American president as US forces seized Baghdad within weeks of the 2003 invasion. [9] In both cases, the ‘victory’ initiated what proved to be the beginning not the end of a war that could neither be won nor terminated for years to come. In both instances, it was followed by atrocities that intensified and were extended from the capital to the entire country.

Following the Nanjing Massacre, the Japanese high command did move determinedly to rein in troops to prevent further anarchic violence, particularly violence played out in front of the Chinese and international press. Leaders feared that such wanton acts could undermine efforts to win over, or at least neutralize, the Chinese population and lead to Japan’s international isolation.

A measure of the success of the leadership’s response to the Nanjing Massacre is that no incident of comparable proportions occurred during the capture of a major Chinese city over the next eight years of war. Japan succeeded in capturing and pacifying major Chinese cities, not least by winning the accommodation of significant elites in Manchukuo and in the Nanjing government of Wang Jingwei, as well as in cities directly ruled by Japanese forces and administrators. [10]

This was not, however, the end of the slaughter of Chinese civilians and captives. Far from it. Throughout the war, Japan continued to rain destruction from the air on Chongqing, Chiang Kai-shek’s wartime capital, and in the final years of the war it deployed chemical and biological bombs against Ningbo and throughout Zhejiang and Hunan provinces. [11]

Above all, the slaughter of civilians that characterized the Nanjing Massacre was subsequently enacted throughout the rural areas where resistance stalemated Japanese forces in the course of eight

years of war. This is illustrated by the *sanko sakusen* or Three-All Policies implemented throughout rural North China by Japanese forces seeking to crush both the Communist-led resistance in guerrilla base areas behind Japanese lines and in areas dominated by Guomindang and warlord troops. [12] Other measures implemented at Nanjing would exact a heavy toll on the countryside: military units regularly relied on plunder to secure provisions, conducted systematic slaughter of villagers in contested areas, and denied POW status to Chinese captives, often killing all prisoners. Above all, where Japanese forces encountered resistance, they adopted scorched earth policies depriving villagers of subsistence.

One leadership response to the adverse effects of the massacre is the establishment of the comfort woman system immediately after the capture of Nanjing, in an effort to control and channel the sexual energies of Japanese soldiers. [13] The comfort woman system offers a compelling example of the structural character of atrocities associated with Japan's China invasion and subsequently with the Asia Pacific War.

In short, the anarchy first seen at Nanjing paved the way for more systematic policies of slaughter carried out by the Japanese military throughout the countryside. The comfort woman system and the three-all policies reveal important ways in which systematic oppression occurred in every theater of war and was orchestrated by the military high command in Tokyo.

Nanjing then is less a typical atrocity than a key event that shaped the everyday structure of Japanese atrocities over eight years of war. While postwar Japanese and American leaders have chosen primarily to "remember" Japan's defeat at the hands of the Americans, the China war took a heavy toll on both Japanese forces and Chinese lives. In the end, Japan faced a stalemated war in China, but one that paved the way for the Pacific War, in which Japan confronted the US and its allies.

The Nanjing Massacre was a signature atrocity of twentieth century warfare. But war atrocities were not unique to Japan.

American War Atrocities: Civilian Bombing, State Terror and International Law

Throughout the long twentieth century, and particularly since World War II, the inexorable advance of weapons technology has gone hand-in-hand with international efforts to place limits on killing and the barbarism associated with war, notably indiscriminate bombing raids and other attacks directed against civilians. Advances in international law have provided important points of reference for establishing international governance norms and for inspiring and guiding social movements seeking to control the ravages of war and advance the cause of world peace.

In the following sections I consider the conduct of US warfare from the perspective of the emerging norms. In light of these norms, international criticism has long centered on German and Japanese atrocities, notably the Holocaust and specific atrocities including the Nanjing Massacre, the comfort women and the bio-warfare conducted by Unit 731. Rarely has the United States been systematically criticized, still less punished, for war atrocities. Its actions, notably the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and its conduct of the Indochina Wars prompted international controversy. [14] However, It has never been required to change the fundamental character of the wars it wages, to engage in self-criticism at the level of state or people, or to pay reparations to other nations or to individual victims of war atrocities.

While the strategic impact and ethical implications of the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have generated a vast contentious literature, US destruction of more than sixty Japanese cities prior to Hiroshima has until recently been slighted both in the scholarly literatures in English and Japanese, and in popular consciousness in Japan, the US, and globally. [15]

Germany, England and Japan led the way in what is euphemistically known as “area bombing”, the targeting for destruction of entire cities with conventional weapons. From 1932 to the early years of World War II, the United States repeatedly criticized the bombing of cities. President Franklin Roosevelt appealed to the warring nations in 1939 on the first day of World War II, “under no circumstances [to] undertake the bombardment from the air of civilian populations or of unfortified cities.” [16] After Pearl Harbor, the US continued to claim the moral high ground by abjuring civilian bombing. This stance was consistent with the prevailing Air Force view that the most efficient bombing strategies were those that pinpointed destruction of enemy forces and strategic installations, not those designed to terrorize or kill noncombatants.

Nevertheless, the US collaborated with Britain in indiscriminate bombing at Casablanca in 1943. While the British sought to destroy entire cities, the Americans continued to target military and industrial sites. On February 13-14, 1945, British bombers followed by US planes destroyed Dresden, a historic cultural center with no significant military industry or bases. By conservative estimate, 35,000 people were incinerated in that single raid. [17]

But it was in Japan, in the final six months of the war, that the US deployed air power in a campaign to burn whole cities to the ground and terrorize, incapacitate, and kill their largely defenseless residents, in order to force surrender. In those months the American way of war, with the bombing of cities at its center, was set in place.

Maj. Gen. Curtis LeMay, appointed commander of the 21st Bomber Command in the Pacific on January 20, 1945, became the primary architect, a strategic innovator, and most quotable spokesman for the US policy of putting enemy cities to the torch. The full fury of firebombing was first unleashed on the night of March 9-10, 1945 when LeMay sent 334 B-29s low over Tokyo, unloading 496,000 incendiaries in that single raid. Their mission was to reduce the city to rubble, kill its citizens, and instill terror in the survivors. The attack on an area that the US Strategic Bombing Survey estimated to be 84.7 percent residential succeeded beyond the planners’ wildest dreams. Whipped by fierce winds, flames detonated by the bombs leaped across a fifteen-square-mile area of Tokyo generating immense firestorms.



Tokyo after the firebombing

How many people died on the night of March 9-10, in what flight commander Gen. Thomas Power termed “the greatest single disaster incurred by any enemy in military history?” The figure of roughly 100,000 deaths and one million homes destroyed, provided by Japanese and American authorities may underestimate the destruction, given the population density, wind conditions, and survivors’ accounts. [18] An estimated 1.5 million people lived in the burned out areas. Given a near total inability to fight fires of the magnitude and speed produced by the bombs, casualties could have been several times higher than these estimates. The figure of 100,000 deaths in Tokyo may be compared with total US casualties in the four years of the Pacific War—103,000—and Japanese war casualties of more than three million.

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Photo 43.—Japanese photo showing bodies of people trapped and burned as they fled through a street during the attack of 9-10 March. Note that automobiles and bicycles were also trapped and burned.

Police photographer Ishikawa Toyo's closeup of Tokyo after the firebombing

Following the Tokyo raid of March 9-10, the US extended firebombing nationwide. In the ten-day period beginning on March 9, 9,373 tons of bombs destroyed 31 square miles of Tokyo, Nagoya, Osaka and Kobe. Overall, bombing strikes pulverized 40 percent of the 66 Japanese cities targeted. [19]

Many more (primarily civilians) died in the firebombing of Japanese cities than in Hiroshima (140,000 by the end of 1945) and Nagasaki (70,000). The bombing was driven not only by a belief that it could end the war but also, as Max Hastings shows, by the attempt by the Air Force to claim credit for the US victory, and to redeem the enormous costs of developing and producing thousands of B-29s and the \$2 billion cost of the atomic bomb. [20]

